

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

**Remarks to United States and Coalition Troops at Bagram Air Base,
Afghanistan**

March 28, 2010

The President. How's it going, Bagram? Well, you know, it turns out that the American people, they let me use this plane called Air Force One, and so I thought I'd come over and say hello.

Couple of people I want to thank, in addition to Sergeant Major Eric Johnson for the outstanding introduction and his great service. I want to thank Major General Mike Scaparrotti. Thank you for your great work as commanding general. I want to thank Ms. Dawn Liberi, who's the senior civilian representative of Regional Command East, for her outstanding work; and Brigadier General Steven Kwast, commander, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing. Thank you all for your outstanding service. Give them a big round of applause.

Thank you for the unbelievable welcome. I know this was on a little bit of short notice.

Audience member. No worries.

The President. Say no worries. [*Laughter*] It is great to be here at Bagram, and it's great to see all the services. We've got Air Force, we got Army, we've got Navy, we've got some marines in the house. And we've got a lot of civilians here too, who are making an outstanding contribution to this effort.

And I'm honored to be joined by America's outstanding civilian-military leadership team here in Afghanistan, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who's doing outstanding work, and the commander of our 43-nation coalition, General Stan McChrystal. The two of them together have paired up to do an extraordinarily difficult task, but they are doing it extraordinarily well, and we are proud of them. Please give your outstanding team a big round of applause. They've got my full confidence and my full support.

We're also joined by troops from some of our coalition partners, because this is not simply an American mission or even just a NATO mission. Al Qaida and their extremist allies are a threat to the people of Afghanistan and the threat to the people of America, but they're also a threat to people all around the world, and that's why we're so proud to have our coalition partners here with us. Thank you very much for the great work that you do. We salute you, and we honor you for all the sacrifices you make, and you are a true friend of the United States of America. Thank you very much.

And we also salute the members of the Afghan National Army who are fighting alongside all of you. They're risking their lives to protect their country. And as I told President Karzai today, the United States is a partner, but our intent is to make sure that the Afghans have the capacity to provide for their own security. That is core to our mission, and we are proud of the work that they are doing and the continuing increased capacity that we're seeing out of Afghan National Security Forces. So thank you very much for the great work you're doing to take responsibility for security here in your own country.

And to the Afghan people, I want to say that I'm honored to be a guest in your country. Now, the Afghans have suffered for decades—decades of war. But we are here to help Afghans forge a hard-won peace while realizing the extraordinary potential of the Afghan people,

Afghanistan's sons and daughters, from the soldiers and the police to the farmers and the young students. And we want to build a lasting partnership founded upon mutual interests and mutual respect, and I'm looking forward to returning to Afghanistan many times in the years to come.

Now, I know for most of you, you didn't get a lot of notice that I was coming. But I want you to understand, there's no visit that I considered more important than this visit I'm making right now, because I have no greater honor than serving as your Commander in Chief. And it is a privilege to look out and see the extraordinary efforts of America's sons and daughters here in Afghanistan. So my main job here today is to say thank you on behalf of the entire American people.

You are part of the finest military in the history of the world, and we are proud of you. And so I want you to know that everybody back home is proud of you. Everybody back home is grateful. And everybody understands the sacrifices that you have made and your families have made to keep America safe and to keep America secure in this vital mission.

And I know it's not easy. You're far away from home. You miss your kids. You miss your spouses, your family, your friends. Some of you, this is your second or your third or your fourth tour of duty. I'll tell you right now the same thing that I said at West Point last December: If I thought for a minute that America's vital interests were not served, were not at stake here in Afghanistan, I would order all of you home right away.

So I want you to know, I want every American serving in Afghanistan, military and civilian, to know, whether you're working the flight line here at Bagram or patrolling a village down in Helmand, whether you're standing watch at a forward operating base or training our Afghan partners or working with the Afghan Government, your services are absolutely necessary, absolutely essential to America's safety and security. Those folks back home are relying on you.

We can't forget why we're here. We did not choose this war. This was not an act of America wanting to expand its influence, of us wanting to meddle in somebody else's business. We were attacked viciously on 9/11. And thousands of our fellow country men and women were killed. And this is the region where the perpetrators of that crime, Al Qaida, still base their leadership. Plots against our homeland, plots against our allies, plots against the Afghan and Pakistani people are taking place as we speak right here. And if this region slides backwards, if the Taliban retakes this country and Al Qaida can operate with impunity, then more American lives will be at stake. The Afghan people will lose their chance at progress and prosperity. And the world will be significantly less secure.

And I'm—as long as I'm your Commander in Chief, I am not going to let that happen. That's why you are here. Now, I've made a promise to all of you who serve: I will never send you into harm's way unless it's absolutely necessary. I anguish in thinking about the sacrifices that so many of you make. That's why I promise I will never send you out unless it is necessary.

But that's only part of the promise, because the other part of the promise is that when it is absolutely necessary, you will be backed up by a clear mission and the right strategy, and you will have the support to finish the job, to get the job done. And I am confident all of you are going to get the job done right here in Afghanistan. I am confident of that.

That's why I ordered more troops and civilians here into Afghanistan shortly after taking office. That's why we took a hard look and forged a new strategy and committed more resources in December. That's why we've pushed our friends and allies and partners to pony up more resources themselves, more commitments of aid and additional forces and trainers.

Our broad mission is clear: We are going to disrupt and dismantle, defeat, and destroy Al Qaida and its extremist allies. That is our mission. And to accomplish that goal, our objectives here in Afghanistan are also clear: We're going to deny Al Qaida safe haven; we're going to reverse the Taliban's momentum; we're going to strengthen the capacity of Afghan security forces and the Afghan Government so that they can begin taking responsibility and gain confidence of the Afghan people.

And our strategy includes a military effort that takes the fight to the Taliban while creating the conditions for greater security and a transition to the Afghans, but also a civilian effort that improves the daily lives of the Afghan people and combats corruption, and a partnership with Pakistan and its people, because we can't uproot extremists and advance security and opportunity unless we succeed on both sides of the border. Most of you understand that.

Many of the troops that I ordered to Afghanistan have begun to arrive, and more are on the way. And we'll continue to work with Congress to make sure that you've got the equipment that you need, particularly as we complete our drawdown in Iraq. We're providing more helicopters; we're providing more intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, more Special Operations Forces, more armored vehicles that can save lives.

And here in Afghanistan, you've gone on the offensive. And the American people back home are noticing. We have seen a huge increase in support in—stateside, because people understand the kinds of sacrifices that you guys are making and the clarity of mission that you're bringing to bear.

And together with our coalition and Afghan partners, our troops have pushed the Taliban out of their stronghold in Marja. We've changed the way we operate and interact with the Afghan people. We see Afghans reclaiming their communities, and we see new partnerships that will help them build their own future and increase their security.

And across the border, Pakistan's mounting major offensives. We've seen violent extremists pushed out of their sanctuaries. We struck major blows against Al Qaida leadership as well as the Taliban's. They are hunkered down. They're worried about their own safety. It's harder for them to move, it's harder for them to train and to plot and to attack, and all of that makes America safer. And we are going to keep them on the run, because that is what's going to be required in order to assure that our families back home have the security that they need. That's the work that you are doing.

So thanks to you, there's been progress these last several months. But we know there are going to be some difficult days ahead. There's going to be setbacks. We face a determined enemy. But we also know this: The United States of America does not quit once it starts on something. You don't quit. The American Armed Services does not quit. We keep at it, we persevere, and together with our partners, we will prevail. I am absolutely confident of that.

And I also want you to know that as you're doing your duty here, we're going to do right by you back home. We're going to help take care of your families, and that's why the First Lady, Michelle Obama, visited with military families and makes sure that their needs are met. That's why she stays after me once she gets home, when I'm at the White House. And we're going to make sure that we are keeping to improve your pay and your benefits, but also things like childcare and support that ensure that you've got a little bit of security knowing your family is being looked after back home.

And we'll be there for you when you come home. That's why we're improving care for our wounded warriors, especially those with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. We're moving

forward with the post-9/11 GI bill so you and your families can pursue your dreams. And we've made the biggest increase in the VA budget in 30 years, because we're going to keep our sacred trust with all those who serve.

You've been there for us, tour after tour, year after year, at a time when too many American institutions have let us down, when too many institutions have put short-term gain in front of a commitment to duty and a commitment to what's right. You've met your responsibilities, you've done your duty—not just when it's easy, but when it's hard. That's why you've inspired your fellow Americans, and that's why you inspire me. That's why you've earned your place next to the very greatest of American generations.

And all of you represent the virtues and the values that America so desperately needs right now: sacrifice and selflessness, honor and decency. That's what I see here today. That's what you represent.

I've seen your sense of purpose and your willingness to step forward and serve in a time of danger. I've seen it from the marines I've met at Camp Lejeune to the cadets at West Point, from the midshipmen at Annapolis to the troops I have met in Iraq and at bases across America and here in Afghanistan. I've seen your courage and your heroism in the story of a young sergeant first class named Jared Monti, who gave his life here in Afghanistan to save his fellow soldiers, and whose parents I was proud to present with our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. I've seen your tenacity and determination in our wounded warriors in Landstuhl and Walter Reed, Americans fighting to stand again and to walk again and to get back with you—their units—incredible dedication, incredible focus, incredible pride. And I've been humbled by your sacrifice, in the solemn homecoming of flag-draped coffins at Dover to the headstones in Section 60 at Arlington, where the fallen from this war rest in peace alongside the fellow heroes of America's story.

So here in Afghanistan, each one of you is part of an unbroken line of American servicemembers who've sacrificed for over two centuries. You're protecting your fellow citizens from danger. You're serving alongside old allies and new friends. You're bringing hope and opportunity to a people who've known a lot of pain and a lot of suffering.

And I know that sometimes when you're watching TV, the politics back home may look a little messy, and people are yelling and hollering and—Democrats this and Republicans that. I want you to understand this: There's no daylight when it comes to support of all of you. There's no daylight when it comes to supporting our troops. That brings us together. We are all incredibly proud. We all honor what you do. And all of you show all of America what's possible when people come together, not based on color or creed, not based on faith or station, but based on a commitment to serve together, to bleed together, and to succeed together as one people, as Americans.

Make no mistake, this fight matters to us. It matters to us; it matters to our allies; it matters to the Afghan people. Al Qaida and the violent extremists who you're fighting against want to destroy. But all of you want to build, and that is something essential about America. They've got no respect for human life. You see dignity in every human being. That's part of what we value as Americans. They want to drive races and regions and religions apart. You want to bring people together and see the world move forward together. They offer fear, in other words, and you offer hope.

And that's why it is so important that you know that the entire country stands behind you. That's why you put on that uniform, because in an uncertain world, the United States of

America will always stand up for the security of nations and the dignity of human beings. That's who we are. That is what we do.

Much has happened to our country and to the world since 9/11. But I'm confident that so long as brave men and women like you—Americans who are willing to serve selflessly half a world away on behalf of their fellow citizens and the dreams of people they've never met—so long as there are folks like you, then I'm confident that our Nation will endure and hope will overcome fear. And I am confident that better days lie ahead.

So thank you very much, everybody. God bless you, God bless the United States Armed Forces, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:13 p.m. in the Clamshell. In his remarks, he referred to Sgt. Maj. Eric Johnson, USA, director of operations, Combined Joint Task Force–82, who introduced the President; Maj. Gen. Curtis M. "Mike" Scaparrotti, USA, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, Regional Commander East, and commander, 82d Airborne Division; and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan.

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Locations: Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

Names: Eikenberry, Karl W.; Johnson, Eric; Karzai, Hamid; Kwast, Steven L.; Liberi, Dawn; McChrystal, Stanley A.; Monti, Janet E.; Monti, Paul; Obama, Michelle; Scaparrotti, Curtis M. "Mike".

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : Bagram Air Base; Afghanistan : Former regime; Afghanistan : Government corruption, efforts to eliminate; Afghanistan : International assistance; Afghanistan : NATO International Security Assistance Force, commander; Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : President; Afghanistan : President Obama's visit; Afghanistan : Relations with Pakistan; Afghanistan : Terrorism; Afghanistan : U.S. Ambassador; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military family benefits, expansion of; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Pay increase; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Traumatic brain injuries, treatment efforts; Decorations, medals, and awards : Congressional Medal of Honor; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Pakistan : Counterterrorism efforts; Pakistan : Relations with Afghanistan; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding.

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